

UTAH CTE: RUNNING IN



NEW CIRCLES

BY KRISTINE DOBSON, SHANNON FISCHIO AND SUSAN THOMAS

Just to be clear from the get-go, we don't have any fool-proof formulas to offer for using your Web site, blog, Facebook, Twitter or YouTube channel in order to more successfully share your career and technical education (CTE) story. However, we can tell the story of our own journey and hope that it may help us all to run faster and more effectively (and perhaps even with scissors!) in these new social circles.

It All Started With a New Web site

UtahCTE.org was initially launched in 2004 as a partnership between the Utah State Office of Education (K-12 public) and the Utah System of Higher Education. The site was a first go at providing a Web site that was student-parent focused versus educator focused. We wanted to answer core questions, "What is CTE?" "Is CTE for me?" "How can I get started?" It was a good beginning, but with the full implementation of Utah's CTE College to Career Pathways initiative, we needed more. We wanted a site that was more interactive, user-friendly, and one that fully integrated some basic social media tools.

We have amazing design and technical talent within the State Office of Education, but updating and operating existing sites consumes all available full-time employees, and so we decided to solicit the help of Web professionals outside our agency. We asked our own IT professionals for their suggestions, requested refer-

ences from agency partners, conducted Internet searches, and brainstormed with colleagues. Ultimately, we found a local company that specializes in Web design and social media and was willing to work within the constraints of our budget. Having their knowledgeable staff dedicated to the project was a great advantage in moving forward quickly. We were generally delighted with the new look and feel of the site, and especially with the new connectivity it offered. The site was designed to:

- Attract students and parents.
- Promote the established CTE branding, but with a fresh feel.
- Facilitate access to CTE information, especially:
 - Pathways
 - Contacts
 - Publications
 - Newsletter (specifically to highlight our *CTE Directions* newsletter and offer an easy way to subscribe.)
- Maximize the advantages of social media—a blog, Facebook, Twitter, and a YouTube channel.

Blog

The purpose of featuring a blog on our Web site is to communicate career information quickly and effectively to students, parents, educators and to the community. A blog is essentially a series of "mini articles" that offers more detail than can be communicated effectively via a Facebook post or in the 140 characters allowed by



Twitter. However, our initial excitement about the blog was tempered with a few challenges. Who would train our staff on how to write a blog? Who would post the blog? Who would monitor comments to the blog? How often would a blog be written? Which staff members would actually participate in writing a blog?

We conducted blog training on the purpose and functionality of a blog after introducing our CTE team to the new Web site, and then it was time to roll up our sleeves and get writing! In the beginning, most staff members were overwhelmed by all the changes wrought by the newly designed site, and the most often repeated

response was, "I don't have time for this!" It took a number of group discussions in order to help our staff understand how a blog can help them promote their programs. Our current approach is to solicit a blog on a specific topic and assist the appropriate staff person in writing a simple draft that can be edited for posting on our site. Our goal is to post a new blog every week so there is always new content among the 10 in rotation on the Web site.

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WHAT WE DID

Contracted with an outside firm to develop a Web site that includes social media features.

Identified a three-person team to take the lead in managing the development of the new Web site and all the post-development update and maintenance of new media.

Took turns managing the various social media to build our familiarity.

Encouraged student participation by having a drawing for an iPod nano from among the students who "liked" us on Facebook, "followed us" on Twitter, and subscribed to our newsletter.

Solicited blogs from CTE staff.

Created an organizational Facebook page that was connected to each team member's personal Facebook pages.

Used Tweetdeck to help manage and organize our Twitter traffic.

First step with YouTube was to simply load existing videos to our channel.

Facebook

"You like me; you really like me!" Facebook gives organizations the opportunity of finding people and inviting them to "like" the organization. Thus, the purpose of having our organization on Facebook is twofold:

1. Facebook offers a venue for sharing official information with those who choose to associate with the organization.

2. Facebook offers its users various ways to interact with our organization, thus enhancing communication and engagement.

You must have a personal Facebook page in order to create an organization page. Our initial Facebook "fans" were staff who were (shall we say) "encouraged," using peer pressure and other tactics, to like Utah CTE on Facebook.

There were some initial pockets of resistance, largely stemming from concerns about privacy, but as staff caught the vision, they invited others—friends, CTE teachers, students and their parents—to join our Utah CTE Facebook community. We continue to discover other CTE organizations and business sponsors who use Facebook, and that has inspired additional support. Facebook has half a billion users, and each

WHAT WORKED

Outside firm dedicated staff members specifically to work on the project.

A small team—identified with the full support of the state CTE director—gave us added flexibility and the authority to make many of the day-to-day decisions.

Over time, each of us identified a "specialty" media for which we are responsible.

CTE teachers were invaluable in getting the word out about the drawing. We used old-fashioned e-mail and various listservs to contact them directly. More contests to come!

We assign specific topics to staff members but we don't require that contributions be in final form.

We spent time to find and connect with other CTE organization Facebook pages (e.g., CTSOs, ACTE) and with our partners in business.

Started a second Twitter account to address CTE teachers (@TeachUtahCTE).

Partnering with other established entities to post CTE-related video content allowed us to initially build our site with minimal resources.

LESSONS LEARNED

Assure that outside firm identifies a project manager to be a single point of contact over the entire course of development. In addition, include a strong training component for which the outside firm will be responsible, and hold them accountable.

It would have been helpful to provide brief "status reports" to CTE staff on a more frequent basis.



Social media are *not* free! Don't underestimate the resources that are required to gain a basic understanding of the media, let alone to keep abreast of developments and manage those media effectively.

Be aware of district policies and parental concerns that have a potential impact on students' ability to engage with social media.

Find ways to make it easy for staff to participate in writing blogs, and to engage with other media.

There is currently no way for one organization to "like" another organization. We think Facebook should consider making this an option!

Take time in the beginning to sort out the needs of target audience(s) to be served by Twitter. Consider having multiple Twitter accounts that can more accurately target specific needs for information.

There are various aspects to building and maintaining a YouTube channel that we have yet to understand. A stronger training component that specifically addresses the concerns/needs defined by staff is highly recommended.

user creates an average of 70 pieces of content in any given month (Bilton, 2010, p. 90); so there is no doubt that we'll continue to discover potential new members of our Facebook community. Facebook is obviously a powerful social

circle, and if you're not running in it, you'll be running behind it!

Twitter

What started as a simple way to let friends provide status updates to other

friends (e.g., "I'm on my way to Gia's, my favorite Italian restaurant") has grown into an application that moves 50 million "tweets" (messages) a day (Bilton, 2010, p. 63). Individual users and organizations alike can send messages of up to 140 characters, the great majority of which now include links to Web sites where you can find longer stories and more substantive information.

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For Utah CTE, Twitter has not only enhanced our ability to drive traffic to our Web site, but it has also been a key resource in defining our "CTE community" to include both individuals and organizations that share our interests. We used the "Find People" feature to initially identify a group of Twitter users to follow—meaning that when they send tweets we receive them—and many followed us right back.

We've attracted other followers as we've gone along—people and organizations that share our interest in "providing the technical skills and academic knowledge needed for meaningful employment" (as per the @UtahCTE Twitter profile). The interplay of tweets, re-tweets and other contacts between and among our followers makes for a dynamic community, and we are looking forward to using that community to greater advantage. We want to solicit comments and see the information flow in all directions!

There are new applications that can

help organize and share the information that is being delivered, e.g., TweetDeck. We especially like the feature that allows us to send/schedule messages to multiple Twitter and Facebook accounts, and the ability to better track incoming messages. Tweetdeck has improved our ability to run more efficiently and effectively in Twitter circles.

YouTube

Did you know that Justin Bieber got his start when hip-hop marketer Scooter Braun came across a couple of videos that Bieber posted to YouTube? YouTube reported that in 2010, there were 24 hours of video being posted to the site *every* minute (Bilton, 2010, p. 90). Yes, definitely another social circle in which we want to be running, and our successes with Facebook and Twitter have fueled our in-

terest in moving forward to build our own YouTube channel. In addition to featuring CTE promotional videos, we envision a whole library of student-produced videos that highlight personal CTE stories. To get a running start (pun intended), we invited students from grades seven to 12 to submit videos that would illustrate the skills that CTE has helped them to achieve. You can check out our YouTube channel at www.UtahCTE.org!

Just Do It!

Running in these new social circles requires a willingness to—as Nike (appropriately) advises—“just do it,” to be open to the ever-evolving nature of the social media, and to learn from the mistakes that are an inevitable part of the experience. To see some of the things we have learned see table on pages 40-41.

Come Join the Circle!

We here in Utah want to wish you the best of luck and much success; we'll be watching for *you* to join these new social circles! 

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